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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000952

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH MINISTER OF LABOR

REF: MANAMA 885

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) The Ambassador discussed unemployment, demonstrations in support of the unemployed, and Shia politics with Minister of Labor Majeed Al Alawi July 4. Al Alawi said that the Ministry had found and offered private sector jobs to the eleven unemployed people who participated in the June 19 unemployment demonstration, but only one accepted the offer. The Ministry is working cooperatively with state-owned companies Bapco and Alba to reserve jobs for unskilled Bahraini workers to allow them to get training and develop their abilities, and so more easily find better work in the private sector. Al Alawi complained that activists advocating on behalf of the unemployed, including Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja, were more interested in promoting their political agendas than in improving citizens' livelihoods. The Minister supports taking a firm line in dealing with Al Khawaja and his provocative actions, saying that leniency could encourage Al Khawaja to become even bolder. Al Alawi said that expanding freedom of expression coupled with government inertia in addressing corruption allowed regime opponents to launch attacks on the Al Khalifas under the guise of fighting corruption. Sunnis are worried that Shia activism could turn into a power grab, and have threatened to stop Al Khawaja if the government does not. End Summary.

Al Khawaja Politicizing Unemployment

2. (C) The Ambassador met with Minister of Labor Majeed Al Alawi July 4 and discussed with him unemployment, demonstrations in support of the unemployed, and Shia politics in Bahrain, among other issues. Al Alawi, a former Shia exile in London, criticized the actions of the Committee for the Unemployed, headed by activist Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja and Shia opposition society Al Wifaq Vice President Hassan Mushaima, saying they were politicizing a serious economic issue. Of the 11 participants in the June 19 demonstration outside the Royal Court who were unemployed (reftel), only one accepted a private sector job offer that was coordinated by the Ministry of Labor. Al Alawi said that when he visits Shia villages, he carries lists of the names of unemployed residents, compiled by local mosques and assembly halls. He routinely discovers that 90 percent of those on the lists are employed but want higher salaries. The other 10 percent refuse to accept jobs other than those with the government, which are more secure and better paying.

3. (C) Al Alawi said he had met with Mushaima and requested his assistance in gathering names of unemployed people looking for work. Mushaima said that Al Khawaja wanted to be a part of any committee working on this issue, but Al Alawi said that he had refused this request. The Minister stated that he wants to focus on assisting the poor people who need jobs, not Al Khawaja's politics.

Effective Skills Development Program

4. (C) He explained that the Ministry had developed a relationship with some state-owned companies to find work for unskilled Bahrainis. Bapco and Alba (the state-owned petroleum and aluminum companies) had reserved a certain number of positions for Bahrainis - Alba held 830 jobs related to the company's expansion project, and Bapco reserved 600 jobs. These positions paid BD 180 per month (\$477) and the companies committed to provide training to the workers, with the possibility of a permanent follow-on position. These workers had seized an opportunity to develop themselves and improve their marketability, and many had successfully found permanent jobs in the private sector. He thought that the Crown Prince's labor reform initiative, which will likely result in increased wages for Bahrainis,

would help entice more citizens to work in the private sector.

No Leniency for Al Khawaja

15. (C) Turning directly to the challenge posed by Al Khawaja, Al Alawi said that he counsels the King and Prime Minister to be scrupulous in applying the law in response to Al Khawaja's actions. The government should not do any more or less than what the law requires in dealing with him. Al Alawi worries that if the GOB displays any leniency, Al Khawaja will take advantage of it. The government should be firm with him, even if the government's actions make Al Khawaja popular in the street. If the government was lenient, "the whole notion of the state is discredited," Al Alawi said. In response to the Ambassador's question, Al Alawi said that Al Khawaja derives his core of support from "the Shirazis," followers of the (Shia) Shirazi school of thought from Kerbala, who are considered to be more radical and confrontational than other Shia groups in Bahrain. Most Shia don't like Al Khawaja, Al Alawi stated.

16. (C) Al Alawi said that, as the country continues to democratize, people find they can express their views more freely. But because the government was not addressing corruption as quickly as it should, those who oppose the Al Khalifas were able to exploit their new freedoms to launch attacks on the family under the guise of fighting corruption. He commented that repeated challenges to the government's authority had caused police to become an object of derision in many Shia villages, saying this was troubling.

Sunnis Threaten to Step In

17. (C) Al Alawi said that Sunnis in Bahrain regard Shia agitation as an attempt to grab power. Powerful people in the government, army, and police force are greatly concerned about what is happening. He said that during the recent demonstration at the Royal Court, a delegation of Sunnis from Riffa, home to the Royal Family, told the government that if the security forces did not step in to stop Al Khawaja, they would take matters into their own hands.

MONROE